

CRITICAL DIGEST

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The Weekly Newsletter Digest of the New York Theatre Scene

New York Theatre Diary

Me and Juliet-Majestic 5/28/53. Rodgers and Hammerstein present their new musical comedy with a show business theme. Cast of 70 features Isabel Bigley, Bill Hayes, Joan McCracken, Ray Walston, Mark Dawson and Jackie Kelk. George Abbott directed, and Robert Alton staged the dances and musical numbers. Jo Mielziner designed the sets, and Irene Sharaff the costumes. Opening night curtain promptly at 7 30 PM.

Current Theatre Reviews

The Grass Harp-Circle in the Square 4/25/53 3 weekly reviewers recommend Off Broadway group's revival of Truman Capote's play which flopped on Broadway last season, each for slightly different reasons. Fantasy of the sensitive yet formless dramatic piece takes on a new dimension in the arena staging, comments Variety mugg. Also the whimsicalities in script are easier to take, he added. Clurman, Nation, adds that drama benefits from the bare production given it downtown, because the uptown try last year was too ornate, too pretty-pretty, and largely miscast. Hewes, Saturday Review, agrees that play has gained intimacy from being produced in the round, and gained unity from the deletion of the unessential Baby Love scene. All complimented director Jose Quintero for his concentration on character relationships and portraits rather than plot. Minor complaint filed by Saturday Review critic on direction at times being monotonous due to its lack of variety.

The King and I-St James 3/29/51. Alfred Drake, subbing during Yul Brynner's vacation from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, continues to win unanimous support from the critics who have revisited the hit. Hawkins, World Telegram & Sun, and Chapman, News, agree with their colleagues who found Drake a more gentle King, and also a better singer, than Brynner. Annamary Dickey, subbing for Constance Carpenter, is handsome, self-possessed, charming and in good voice, adds News critic.

Ralph Slater-Bijou 5/21/53. Evidently the majority of NY drama editors and critics didn't think Ralph Slater's one man evening of hypnosis tricks qualified as theatre, because only 4 drama critics covered it. Hawkins, WT&S, filed a polite report on the proceedings, most of which relied on the current audiences ability to entertain themselves while he hypnotizes them. Sheaffer, Eagle, was less gentle. Slater, he panned, should have begun his show by hypnotizing his audience into the belief that they were going to have an enjoyable time. Chapman, News, okayed it only if you want to go to sleep in a hurry. Coleman, Mirror, marked it an amusing evening.

More Bests & Worsts

Variety annual poll of NY Drama Critics Circle favorites of season resulted in Victor Moore, Shirley Booth, Jack Whiting, and Rosalind Russell being cheered for their work this season in leading roles. George Axelrod, 7 Year Itch, was picked as the most promising playwright... Worst show of season, for half a dozen reasons, picked by George Jean Nathan, Journal American, was Buttrio Square. Among other things he judged it had the worst set designs, worst costumes, worst score, and worst lyrics... To bring the award season to a close "Theatre Arts" anon George Spelvin is presenting the critics with a set of cardboard medals for their feats this year.

 ' Off Broadway '

The World of Sholem Aleichem, which Rachel Productions presented for 3 weeks at Barbizon Plaza Theatre will re-open in Sept...Shuberts are reported to be interested in bringing the all negro revue The Year Round to one of their houses next season...Patricia Neal signed to appear in School for Scandal, first of 4 productions presented by Teresa Hayden at Theatre de Lys starting June 9...Amato Opera Theatre presenting Il Trovatore week ends on group's revolving stage...Philotetes, Gide's version of Sophocles, will be presented June 24 by Experimental Theatre Department of Dramatic Workshop.

Dylan Thomas will lead readings from his Under Milk Wood play May 28 at YMHA...Monday's Heroes has moved to Greenwich Mews Theatre...Candida is current Dobbs Ferry, NY, show, featuring Johnny Stewart...Bajazet by Racine performed in French by Centre d'Art Dramatique at Current Stages.

The Plough and the Stars produced by Trio Productions at Cherry Lane Theatre provides an interesting, worthwhile evening for anyone who is eager to fill in a gap in his theatre going experience, comments Sheaffer, Eagle. Sean O' Casey play, which provoked audience riots in Boston in 1927, receives a few effective performances, he noted. But critic thought production would have been stronger if the players would enunciate more clearly.

Equity Library Theatre productions this season is credited with getting jobs for 80% of those working in or on its 15 shows, Venezky, Variety, reports. Explaining the \$30 per play budget myth as "mad money", article explains that union backs each show with \$2000 for theatre rentals, lights, costumes, props, printing, etc.

 ' Vaudeville '

Palace current bill headlines Steve Evans, with Tommy Hanlon, Jr, Violet Carlson, 3 Hollidays, Roy Douglas, Baudy's Greyhounds, Arriola Family, and the Appletons.

 ' Theatre Film Notes '

Geraldine Page signed to appear in John Wayne's next film "Hondo"... Michael Kidd, Can-Can dance director, to stage dances in Danny Kaye's next film "Knock on Wood"...MGM will film "Paint Your Wagon" via Cinerama process...Jack Lemmon, who made his Broadway debut in "Room Service" this season, signed by Columbia Pictures for Judy Holliday's next film "A Name for Herself" directed by Garson Kanin... John Williams will repeat his role in Dial M for Murder to be filmed by Warners with Ray Milland in the Maurice Evans role...Actors Jack Palance and John Ireland have formed an independent film company, and plan to produce "Dark of the Moon."

 ' Theatre Book Notes '

Jose Ferrer working on his autobiography for Simon & Schuster entitled "Act I"... "Best Short Plays of 1952-53" edited by Margaret Mayorga published by Dodd, Mead...Current London hit play "The Young Elizabeth" by Jeannette and Francis Letton being published by Harpers as a novel...Time drama critic Louis Kronenberger editing "A Cavalcade of Comedies" for Simon & Schuster...Actors Equity has published its annual "Players Guide" which gives biographical data and pictures of 3500 actors, directors, etc.

 ' Theatre TV & Radio Notes '

Ethel Merman to appear on June 15 Ford 50th Anniversary program staged by Leland Hayward on CBS and NBC TV...Melvyn Douglas to appear as lead in CBS TV "Hollywood Off Beat" series... "Stage Struck" will present interviews and scenes from current Broadway plays on CBS Radio...Celeste Holm will star in NBC TV film musical comedy series "Really, Caroline"...Leo G Carroll, Anne Jeffreys and Robert Sterling will play leads in "Topper" TV film series.

Green Room Department

REVIEWERS FUNCTION...The essential function of the theatre critic is not to blame or please, comments Clurman, Nation. The director-critic believes the reviewer should see, describe, clarify, spread understanding, and if possible, knowledge. If the critic does this, he will be stimulating, Clurman believes, even when we think him wrong. The critic is not to be regarded as a burden or a competitor to the artist, but as an adjunct, cooperating with the artist for the benefit of the community of which both artist and critic are a part. Above all the playgoer should not imitate the reviewers' most uncreative aspect and deadly fault, he concludes, which is to think of plays as "hits" or "flops."

CRITICAL THOUGHTS...Many theatre fans are disappointed because they expect too much or because they have formed a false idea of what they are going to see, surmises Chapman, News...Who can say that drama critics are anything but kindly after the reviews for Can-Can and Bernardine, asks Watts, Post...\$50 top for the best seats at ANTA's "Highlights of the Empire" seems too much to Morehouse, World Telegram & Sun...

DRAMA BEAT...Double life of Police Captain William Buckley, Passaic, NJ, detailed in news story in Times. Every weekday at 4 AM the captain turns over his desk to his relief, gets a few hours sleep, and commutes to NY to attend day sessions at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. The 60 year old police official does not want to launch a stage career, but is studying dramatics to help him make better speeches.

COLUMN TIPS...A former drama critic is at a NY rest home where a playwright is also a patient, whispers Wilson, Post...Closed circuit TV performances of Top Banana are expected to pay the full investment back to angels, hears Walker, News...Sardi set still gabbing about backstage fist fight on closing night in Philadelphia of Masquerade, reports Kilgallen, Journal American

TOMORROW'S STARS...Annual selection of Dan Blum, Theatre World, for newcomers with the "Most Promising Personalities" include: Geraldine Page, Mid Summer; Sheree North, Hazel Flagg; Edith Adams, Wonderful Town; Gwen Verdon, Can-Can, Eileen Heckart, Pionio; Rosemary Harris; The Climate of Eden; Penelope Munday, The Climate of Eden; Ray Stricklyn, The Climate of Eden; Peter Kelley, Two's Company; Johnny Stewart, Bernardine; John Kerr, Bernardine; Richard Kiley, Misalliance; and Paul Newman, Pionio.

MAIL BOX...Watch Your Step, a musical which played at the New Amsterdam Theatre in 1914 starring Vernon and Irene Castle, should be revived at the City Center suggests reader of Cahn, Host...Saturday Review reader wonders on what authority does Henry Hewes corrupt the pronunciation of Camino Real, and is so informed by the editors that Tennessee Williams is the man to blame...Times readers objected to Robert Downing's article on "Arena Theatre" because performers simply aren't engaging at all angles, and because experts at a recent conference believed any play could be done in the circle.

NYC Theatre News Round Up

"Angels" as backers of Broadway plays may be a thing of the past if Joshua Logan is successful in selling tickets to Kind Sir, Norman Krasna comedy due in NY Nov 4, to his private mailing list of 32,000...Kim Stanley, Pionio, to take leave of absence due to approaching motherhood...Richard Whorf, Fifth Season, showing water colors at Milch Galleries.

 ' Digests of Famous Hits-- Oklahoma! '

Some people may have disliked Rodgers and Hammerstein's first joint effort, which opened March 31, 1943 at the St. James Theatre, but they weren't then writing drama reviews for the NY dailies or weeklies. The Theatre Guild's production of the musical version of Lynn Riggs "Green Grow the Lilacs" was staged by Rouben Mamoulian. Cast included Alfred Drake, currently appearing at St. James in The King and I, and Joan McCracken, who opens this week across the street at the Majestic in the most recent Rodgers & Hammerstein show Me and Juliet. Also in the first cast of the famed musical were Joan Roberts, Betty Garde, Howard da Silva, Joseph Buloff, Bambi Lynn, and, of course, Celeste Holm. The critical score was a unanimous 100% raves.

Agnes de Mille ballets shared the plaudits of all the critics with Rodgers' score and Hammerstein's book and lyrics. Mantle, News, thought some theatre fans might object to such large doses of modern ballet, but otherwise he rated it as the most thoroughly and attractively American musical since Show Boat. Nichols, Times, credited Rodgers with writing his best integrated score, and the entire production for giving the lie to the rumor that the Theatre Guild is dead. Songs, dances and story are triumphantly blended into a jubilant, enchanting musical, commented Barnes, Herald Tribune. While Rascoe, World Telegram, noted that Holm stole the fresh, lively, colorful and enormously pleasing musical.

2 daily critics voiced minor complaints that parts of book were monotonous. Waldorf, Post, okayed show but did comment that start was mild and monotonous; while Morehouse, Sun, wrote that show which is fresh, charming and diverting, is inclined to undue slowness and monotony at times. Latter critic urged Broadway to keep Joan Roberts fully employed so Hollywood wouldn't steal her. Anderson, Journal American, admitted book could stand cutting, but it really wasn't anything to worry about. Critic reported that even Theatre Guild first nighters, suspected for years of not having hands, applauded.

"Oklahoma!" is going to have a long run" predicted Krutch, Nation, though trade paper critics weren't so sure. Frolich, Billboard, enjoyed it but warned of dire results if story ever sold to movies. While Ibee, Variety, settled for labeling it a diverting evening in the theatre by a new winning combination. Gibbs, New Yorker, was completely enchanted by the gay, stylish, imaginative musical.

 ' Pros & Cons by T M K '

The myth that drama critics never, but never, offer the theatre any constructive advice, died at this week's Actors Fund annual meeting. After the heart warming treasurer's report and the swift re-election of Walter Vincent for his 13th term, Chapman, News, offered advice and \$5 to the Fund. Critic revealed that he now charges speculators prices, and gives the proceeds of tickets acquired for friends, etc to the Actors Fund. Critic suggested all theatre workers adopt this practice in getting tickets as favors. And in case any skeptic doubted him, Chapman presented \$5 to Fund treasurer Vinton Freedley.

"Playwright at Work" by John van Druten (Harpers) is a valuable contemporary record of how one of our foremost playwrights feels about drama, and exactly how he goes about writing a play. It will be of extreme interest to every playgoer who has seen or read any of his hits. But the book might prove dangerous if taken by an inexperienced student or teacher who takes the advice as a model on how all plays should be written.

For the record: 2 members of the advisory board of the Pulitzer Prize committee attend all of the NY plays, but not all judges saw Picnic.

